

# How does the labor market for parents change during the COVID-19 pandemic?

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Differences in labor force participation rates between genders are prevalent within the labor market, but these differences have been amplified with the onset of the coronavirus 2019 disease (COVID-19) pandemic, especially for mothers. In a working paper titled “[Parents in a pandemic labor market](#)” (Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, Working Paper 2021-04, February 4, 2021), authors Olivia Lofton, Nicolas Petrosky-Nadeau, and Lily Seitelman identify the different labor market outcomes between working men and women and working parents.

Lofton and coauthors find that, overall, employment of men declined by 12 percent compared with 15 percent of women in April 2020 (relative to February 2020). While the initial fall and recovery in employment were similar between nonparent men and women, the initial fall in employment was smaller for fathers than for mothers and nonparents. In addition, recovery prospects for mothers stalled compared with fathers and nonparents. Once the new school year started, recovery halted and the gender employment gap for parents continued to rise, whereas the labor force participation for nonparent women and men remained similar. The authors note that this finding would mean that the employment gap itself was driven more by parent status than by gender differences.

In addition, the authors discover that the labor force participation rates and employment to population ratio disproportionately affected both women and mothers. After controlling for demographic characteristics, the authors observe that these data show that the pandemic had a greater effect (2 times as large) on mothers with less education compared with the effect on college-educated mothers. These data also show that mothers in the lowest income tercile were largely affected (5 times as large) by the pandemic as compared with mothers in the highest income tercile. Interestingly, the age of the youngest child in the household appears not to have affected any labor market outcomes for parents.

Jobs with flexible working hours have helped cushion the overall effect of the pandemic on employment prospects, limiting the decline in employment numbers among mothers. However, simply having the ability to telework has not changed outcomes for either mothers or fathers. The authors find that jobs with flexible working hours are more important than telework capability during a pandemic when parents need to prioritize childcare. Disruptions to a child’s schooling can also affect the labor force participation rates of mothers because of the absence of childcare options. In general, the authors note a negative relationship between the degree of the disruption of schooling and the change in the labor force participation rates among mothers and nonparent women.

Unlike its role in previous recessions, the role of childcare during the pandemic recession has been critical in introducing mothers back into the workforce, which suggests that childcare obligations could hold recovery back.

The authors suggest that reopening schools and daycare centers and increasing job flexibility would help recover the labor force participation rates to prepandemic levels and assist the growth prospects during the pandemic.